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ABSTRACT

Both student and adult writers need to learn how to imagine clear and full contexts for their writing. These contexts include awareness of audience, knowledge of purpose, and creation of the proper voice befitting the purpose and audience. The critical necessity of these three elements in writing can be taught and learned most effectively through the study of literature, because literature by its very nature is an authentic voice speaking in a fully imagined context to fully imagined auditors or readers. Studying literature also increases students' abilities to use their imaginations and to maintain a critical awareness of what constitutes good writing. The aims of one technique for using literature to teach students about writing contexts are to present the author as a writer, to help the student reader think as a writer, and to create an identification between these writers that facilitates the transfer of writing technique from the professional to the student writer. This teaching technique involves both using the literary author's first and intermediate drafts as examples of how writing is revised for greatest effect by constantly imagining the desired context, and having student writers complete writing assignments similar to the assignment the author accomplished in the literary work. (RL)

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Literature, Basic Skills, and the Workplace: Making Connections

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What I have to say today grows most directly from my experience as an off-campus writing consultant, in particular from my work with a Massachusetts regional planning commission. It has its roots also, however, ir my training as a Ph.D. in English Literature, and in my experience as a writing teacher in high schools, universities, writing centers, and jails. From these experiences, like the servant of Job, "I only am escaped alone to tell thee."

Unlike Job's servant, however, I bring good news. What I have found, or what I believe I have found, is a solid justification for teaching literature in a basic skills or pre-vocational curriculum. My justification does not rest upon grounds hortatory or nostalgic, but upon the temporarily more solid ground of utility. I will argue that the teaching of writing, if properly understood, must include the teaching of literature. If it does not, we run the desparate risk of creating, through our basic skills curricula, a class of graduates who will be unable to function as writers in a workplace.

But before I move to the argument, I will give you the experience upon which the argument is based. This experience was my first full-scale attempt to teach writing in a non-academic

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setting: no course, no credits, no classroom. I learned more about the teaching of writing in this situation than I had learned in twenty years of academic teaching. In this situation, everything that was unecessary fell away, and what was important stood out in bold relief.

Early last spring I was asked to do a series of two three-hour writing workshops for the staff of a local planning commission. When I asked why they felt they needed the workshops, the staff said they had been told, by a number of different people, that the writing emanating from their organization was dreadful, unreadable. So I asked them to give me a sample of their writing. They did, and their critics were right. The writing was dreadful. Here is a passage from a letter that came from their shop:

Dear Dr. Conrad:

Further to our telephone conversation this afternoon, I am requesting your assistance in obtaining a list of your full-time employees' (20 hours or more per week) home communities. The format in which you provide this information is entirely up to you: either a list of numbers of people by community or a list of numbers of people by zip code is entirely acceptable to us; however, one caveat applies. As I indicated to you over the telephone, we ask that you break out your Springfield and Chicopee employees by zip code.

And here is another passage from another letter:

Dear Dr. Casaubon,

This letter is to advise you of the feasibility of the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority(PVTA) providing an E and H van to the towns of Brimfield, Holland, and Wales, in order that Elderbus might better allocate four new E and H vans to be delivered in April, 1981, under a fourth round award from the Urban Mass Transportation Administration's(UMTA) Section 16(6)(2) Capital

Grant Program.

The burden of this letter, can you believe it, is this: "Sorry, but we can't fund your bus."

Now how to deal with this prose? What to do to make it better? The normal procedure, à la Zinsser or Strunk and White, is to demonstrate to the writer how far this prose is from "good writing." The problem with this approach is that it does not work. It increases the writers' anxiety, which may have been part of the problem in the first place. It also does not solve the problem. A description of the badness of the writing, however true it may be, is not necessarily useful. So I tried coming at the bad writing from another perspective. I assumed that the badness of the writing had its source in the writers' inability to imagine audience, purpose, and voice. "This writing is to no one, and from no one," I said to myself. And then I went back to my study and set about designing a workshop that would have as its central aim the improvement of the writers' sense of audience, purpose, and voice. With the introduction of these terms, you begin to see the connection I will make with literature.

When I arrived at the first workshop, it became immediately and intuitively clear that I had made the right decision. The Commission's staff was an interesting crew: secretaries and typists, who hoped that the workshop would clean up their superiors' prose; and planning professionals and administrators, who hoped that the workshop would improve the editing capabilities of their secretaries. Both groups feared a grammar lesson, which

they had had, apparently, before. They did not get one. I began with a pamphlet they had produced, one on septic systems. The pamphlet is a disaster. Someone, somewhere in the Commission or its staff, had decided that the staff should produce a pamphlet on septic systems, but no one had apparently thought about the potential audience for such a pamphlet.

For this reason, the pamphlet moves at random from a description of the system to a description of potential problems, and finally to a section headed "The Solution," an unfortunate choice of word, I forebore to say. The pamphlet, like the letters I have quoted from, lacks voice, audience, and a sense of purpose relative to that audience. "Who is the pamphlet addressed to?" I asked. "Homeowners," they answered. "That's not enough," I replied. "Who is going to read this pamphlet? And under what circumstances? Will it be read by a homeowner whose system is backing up, boiling over, whatever these things do? Or will it be read by a person who is thinking about building a house and installing a septic system? If the former, Solution #5(Be sure that a new system is installed in a good location and properly constructed) is going to be advice given too late." "Or," I continued, is the pamphlet to be read by contractors who install septic systems? Or by members of environmental commissions? Or boards of health?" There were no useful answers to these questions forthcoming from the staff. As they, you, and I realize, the pamphlet is just a pamphlet, addressed to no clearly imagined audience. It has no context: no audience, no purpose, no voice.

Here is where my training in literature became so important.

Works of literature create contexts that are fully imagined. Just to begin a poem is to enter a fully-imagined world with voice, implied reader, and situation. "Whose woods these are I think I know"...the voice goes on, talking to its reader, driven by a need to say just what it is saying to just that person. Tristram Shandy: "I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me." Or Jane Eyre. "There was no possibility of talking a walk that day." Or Joan Didion. Or Jerome Bruner, Nora Ephron, Eric Ericson. When I read literature, I am listening to someone talk about something to an implied audience. When we listen to the prose of the Commission, we hear no voice saying nothing to no audience.

So we began with audience, because that seemed the easiest place to begin. "To whom is the septic tank pamphlet addressed? To whom might it be addressed?" The group decided that the pamphlet could usefully be directed to homeowners who were having trouble with their septic systems. Once they had decided upon an audience, they could, and did, begin to think about contents(what should be left in, added, left out) and structure(what should come first, second, third). Clearly, if the pamphlet is addressed to someone who is having trouble right now, it should begin by telling the reader what to do right now. Then it should tell the reader how to set about pinpointing the probem. Is the leach-field full? Is there a blockage in a pipe? Does the tank need pumping? "What," I asked, "might be the causes of a failure in the system?"The answers to this question would become a list of potential

problems, a part of the revised pamphlet. Next would come a section on preventive maintenance: how to treat the system in the future to prevent or postpone a recurrence of the failure.

Once the audience had been clearly established, I asked, "What is the purpose of the pamphlet?" The answer came quickly: to keep the septic systems in the planning area functioning smoothly and efficiently. The consequences of un-smooth and inefficient function were also clear: polluted ground water, unhappy and perhaps diseased citizens, calls for the installation of town sewers in difficult terrain, and expense and strain on the community served by the Commission. Again, in asking questions about purpose and consequence, I was asking the group to exercise their imaginations.

Finally I felt that I knew the group well enough to begin to think about the third of the three components that together form the context of a document: voice. "Who or what is the Commission?" I asked. General incomprehension and, where there was comprehension, discomfort. So I pressed on. "Is the Commission a radical activist? When it writes about septic systems, is it angry as it thinks about thoughtless pollution of groundwater, the premature death of ponds and lakes, man's inhumanity toward man? Or is it a solid citizen, a cooperative and helpful member of the community that just happens to know, on this subject alone, perhaps, more than its reader?" Before this group wrote as a staff, for a Commission, they would have to agree, somehow, upon who they were. I gave them a start on what Walker Gibson would

call a persona:

The Commission is an organization dedicated to the rational and civilized development of the lower Pioneer Valley. Its correspondence and its publications reflect the character of the organization. We are a responsible and respectable unit. We treat others decently and expect to be treated decently by others. We are engaged in work that we feel is useful and important. We take justifiable pride in the character and quality of our work. We know that the world is not perfect, and we know that our efforts will not make it perfect. But we believe that our work will make the world better, and this belief gives us endurance and patience. We acknowledge the many kinds of vice: some people, some of the time, are lazy, self-interested, angry, petty. It may be that most people, most of the time, are some or all of these. And yet we take the high road, expecting decent, rational behavior from people and institutions. It may be that the force of our expectation will make it so.

In this workshop series I did what I have described: that is, I worked with the context of the documents that were being written---audience, purpose, voice. I did not do a number of things I might have done, because they seemed unnecessary and, in this particular situation, downright foolish. I did not talk, for example, about subject-verb agreement. I did not talk about 'conciseness' or 'parallel structure' or the need to avoid the passive. I did not once tell them what good writing was, because, E. D. Hirsch's powerful argument notwithstanding, the context determines what good writing must be. When I began the workshop one of the participants rose from his seat and asked, or rather said, "You're not going to tell us how to write our letters, pamphlets, and reports, are you?" Because I wasn't, I could truthfully say, "No, I'm not," and we could proceed. Behind the rhetorical question was this statement: "We know our business, and

you don't, and you can't tell us anything about writing in general that applies to our special situation." And this statement is true. Peter Elbow, James Moffett, Roger Garrison, Janet Emig and others have said this before me: general statements about writing in general are a waste of time. Writing textbooks that contain general statements about writing are a waste of time and money. In this workshop I did not describe good writing; I helped the writers understand the context of their writing. Without such an understanding, all the correctness in the world could only produce turgid, lifeless, impenetrable prose.

At the end of the workshop, we asked the participants for an evaluation. The group had enjoyed the workshops and had found them useful. All the available instruments agree: the workshop was a success. But did it make the writing better? I doubt it. It did no harm, and perhaps there will be some long-term positive effect. But a six-hour workshop can not undo the ravages of a vocational education, a curriculum in which literature is pushed aside by grammar, sentence combining exercises, workbooks, or any of the other quick-and-easy snake-oil solutions to the writing problem. What the workshops have shown me, more clearly than I have been shown most things, is that literature ought to be at the center of a basic skills program. I do not argue this on the usual grounds. The Rockefeller Commission report, The Humanities and American Life, argues that the humanities are fundamental, basic, the foundation of an education. "Doctors, lawyers, and business men and women who pass over the liberal arts in a premature quest for expertise are not likely to be better professionals. Indeed, they

will probably be less capable than colleagues whose professional training rests, in Dr. Lewis Thomas's words, on 'the bedrock of knowledge about our civilization.'" But "Bedrock" is not an argument; it is a metaphor, and if a person does not accept the metaphor, the argument falls. "Bedrock" can too easily become "frill" or "bauble" or "elitist sham." I prefer to argue for literature that it can, when it is properly taught, exercise our imaginations in a way that makes good writing possible in a workplace. In literature we confront authentic voices("Call me Ishmael," the voice begins) speaking in fully imagined contexts to fully imagined auditors or readers. Here is what literature has to teach writers, and it is a basic skill indeed.

It seems increasingly clear to me, however, that not just any literature course will do. If literature is to effect a person's writing in the way I have suggested, it may be that we will have to teach literature in some new ways. I have described one such way in a recent article in College Composition and Communication, and I will outline it briefly here. The aims of this technique are these: to present the author as a writer; to help the student reader think of him/herself as a writer; and through the potential identification between writer and writer, to facilitate the transfer of technique. To achieve these aims, I employ these strategies: I demystify the text by bringing in copies of the writer's work in the disrepair of the drafting stages, letters from the writer saying how awful the whole process is, and so on; and I do everything I can to help the student readers tackle a problem that the writer has tackled. The second of these

strategies needs some explanation. When and if I teach Henry James, I give a writing assignment like this:

Write from the point of view of a man or woman who is in a psychic fog, who cannot see out clearly, if at all, whose mental energies are so consumed by internal conflict that the conscious mind is stalled, blocked, partially paralyzed. The sentences should include verbs that are themselves blocked by modifiers(she hardly knew) and verbs in the passive mode(she was conveyed) and the sentences should appear to be long and aimless in their progress toward a point but dimly understood, perhaps not understood at all.

I give you a situation. A man or woman sits having breakfast. You, the writer, have direct access to his/her mental processes. Also having breakfast, perhaps across a small table, is a person of the opposite sex. The breakfast is a social occasion. The food: toast, coffee, strawberry jam. You are on your own.

or when I teach Willa Cather, I give them an assignment like this:

Describe a scene, or part of a scene, that you know well. Describe it briefly, 25-50 words at most, and then go into its past. What has happened here in the past? What happened in the beginning? If possible, include a reference to another place, to an event that took place thousands of miles away, or perhaps include a person who has travelled to this place from a geographical/cultural distance.

Having written this assignment, the students can approach Willa Cather as a fellow-writer, not as a supernatural being who has produced somehow directly from her brow a "masterpiece of western literature." When I teach the Odyssey, I ask the students to become in their imaginations someone like Odysseus facing the situation that he faces at the beginning of the Nausicaa episode.

Imagine that you are a man, American, age 50-55, a veteran of American war or business, successful, with wife, children, and comfortable home. You have been shipwrecked somewhere off the

American coast. You swim for a day in warm seas; that night, exhausted, you hear surf and feel hard ground under your feet. You stagger ashore and fall asleep in scrub oak.

The next morning you are awakened by the voices of young girls, playing in a tidal pool. You need help, and they are the only source of help. So, crusty with salt and covering your nakedness with a branch of scrub oak, you approach one of the girls and begin to speak.

Or if I am teaching Richard Wright's short story, "Almos' a Man," I begin with this writing assignment:

A fifteen year old farm boy has just, against his parents' will, bought a pistol. He puts the pistol under his pillow and sleeps the night through. It is now morning. He wakes and takes the pistol from its hiding place. You have direct access to the thoughts of the boy; indeed, you are, as you write, so close to him that the story is almost yours. You use the third person(he waked) but you could easily change to the first person(I waked).

In 100 words or so describe the actions and thoughts of the boy as he holds the pistol and thinks about it and perhaps about other things. Here is your first sentence: "The first movement he made the following morning was to reach under his pillow for the gun."

After a course in literature designed according to these lines, I find that the students' expository writing, performed under examination conditions, is remarkably different from the usual run of examination prose. The prose is different from the usual prose in its sense of context: there is a voice, talking about something, to a clearly imagined audience.

Now to wrap all this up. Through my experience in teaching workers at work sites, I find that working writers need to know how to imagine clear and full contexts for their writing. Bad

writing seems to have its source in a deep-seated misconception of the place in the world occupied by a piece of writing. Bad writers tend to assume that a piece of writing is a product; good writers assume that a piece of writing is from someone, addressed to someone, and addressed to that someone for a clear purpose. Through literature, when taught in the ways I have suggested, we can help student writers grow in their ability to imagine contexts for writing. If we do not do this, if we continue to teach 'basic writing' as it is taught widely in my own institution and elsewhere---the presentation of rules, the description of good writing----we run the risk of creating a caste of students who will know the rules, but will not be able to function effectively as writers in the world of work.